

A black and white portrait of Evan Thomas, the author, wearing a suit and tie, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

IKE'S BLUFF

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER'S
SECRET BATTLE TO SAVE THE WORLD

EVAN THOMAS

Author of **THE WAR LOVERS**

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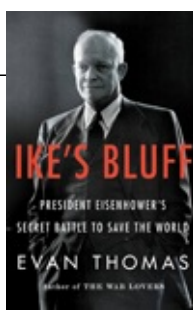
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BATTLE TO SAVE THE WORLD**

EVAN THOMAS



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The problem is not merely man against man or nation against nation. It is man against war.

—Dwight Eisenhower, April 4, 1956

Introduction

Tell No One



Ike (front), about age thirteen, with his gang (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas)

AT EIGHT THIRTY ON THE NIGHT of January 17, 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower gave his farewell address from the Oval Office. Even after years of coaching from actor Robert Montgomery, Eisenhower did not look comfortable giving his televised speech. He disliked using a teleprompter, and he began by glancing down and reading from the printed text on his desk. He paused, blinked, looked up at the lines on the screen, looked back down at the speech, lost his place, and tripped over a word.¹ At first, what he said was unremarkable, but then Eisenhower began to talk about what he called “the military-industrial complex.” “This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience,” he said. “... We must not fail to comprehend its grave implications.... The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

This was not the message most Americans expected to hear from a former army general, a hero of World War II. Eisenhower spoke in the flat twang of the Kansas prairie of his youth. The medium of television could not quite convey what came across so strongly in person. But there was a sense of urgency in his voice and an undertone of strength and power. After visiting with the president in January 1955, the diplomat David Bruce wrote in his diary that Eisenhower was “what the Romans meant by ‘vir.’ ” The literal translation of *vir* is “a hero, masculine or manly person.” Bald and gray-faced, peering through glasses as he struggled with the teleprompter, Eisenhower looked old. But he was still *vir*.² Eisenhower warned against “plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come...” Then he turned to the subject that was closest to his heart. He spoke of the danger of war and the need for disarmament in the nuclear age:

“Because this need is so sharp and apparent I confess that I lay down my official responsibilities in this field with a definite sense of disappointment. As one who has witnessed the horror and the

lingering sadness of war—as one who knows that another war could utterly destroy this civilization which has been so slowly and painfully built over thousands of years—I wish I could say tonight that lasting peace is in sight [on his teleprompter script, he doubly underlined “wish” and “is in sight”].

“Happily, I can say that war has been avoided.”

Three days later, at the inauguration, Eisenhower was a spent figure. His farewell address, despite good notices, had already been eclipsed. The attention was on John F. Kennedy, the incoming president, tanned and overcoatless, young and vigorous, as he summoned a new generation to national greatness. Eisenhower, bundled up against the cold, sat silently on the podium. When the ceremony was over, the ex-president and his wife, Mamie, climbed into the five-year-old Chrysler Imperial that she had bought for his sixty-fifth birthday, and their driver headed to their farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. A single Secret Service car led the way. When they got there, Ike’s grandson, David, recalled in a memoir, “the Secret Service honked the horn and made a U-turn, heading back to Washington.”³ Eisenhower hopped out of the car and opened the gate. That night, he tried to place his first phone call in twenty years. Frustrated, turning red as he clicked the receiver button to no effect, he yelled out, “Come show me how you work this Goddamn thing!”⁴

The greatest hero in the greatest war ever fought never saw combat. As a young officer in World War I, Ike, as he was universally and usually affectionately known, had been stuck stateside training troops, ending up in Gettysburg. It was an early lesson in forbearance. “I suppose,” he commiserated with a fellow officer on November 11, 1918, when the news of the armistice broke as the two men eagerly waited orders to go overseas, “we’ll spend the rest of our lives explaining why we didn’t get into this war.” Then he blurted out, in a rush of stilted syntax: “By God, from now on I am cutting myself such a swath and will make up for this.”⁵

Eisenhower never shot at anyone, or was shot at, but he saw the effects of war, again and again, over the years. After World War I, he wrote a guide to the battlefields of France, where bodies were buried in mass graves by the thousands and shards of bone and skulls still poked through the soil.⁶ During the Second World War, General Eisenhower was too valuable to the Allied cause to risk his life, and he had to avoid capture because he knew the highly guarded secret of ULTRA, the Allies’ code-breaking operation.⁷ But he often toured the battlefield, at times so soon after the fighting that he could smell the rotting flesh.⁸ After Germany fell, he walked through the Nazi concentration camp called Ohrdruf-Nord, a subcamp of Buchenwald, near the town of Gotha, with his friend the tough-talking General George Patton. Patton threw up. Ike ordered the mayor of Gotha to turn out the townspeople to remove the dead bodies. The mayor and his wife went home that night and hung themselves. (“Maybe, there’s some hope after all,” Ike remarked, apparently relieved that the German conscience had not been obliterated by war and Nazism.)⁹ In Germany, Eisenhower toured the squalid camps of the so-called displaced persons. They were homeless, but at least they were alive. As Supreme Allied Commander, Eisenhower knew that hundreds of thousands more had died in the giant firebombing raids on German cities. Later, on a low-altitude flight following the path of the warring German and Russian armies across the Ukraine to Moscow, Eisenhower did not see a single building left standing.¹⁰ Eisenhower had witnessed how war brought out courage and comradeship, the best in men, and also the worst. During the Battle of the Bulge, Eisenhower knew that most men who were “separated from their units,” in official jargon, were in fact trying to desert. He was vexed that

American soldiers in jail for petty infractions almost always declined a pardon if it meant going to the front. As the American army liberated Europe in the winter of 1944–45, Eisenhower was so disturbed by reports that American GIs had raped local women that “at one point,” wrote military historian Mark Perry, he “thought the only solution was to line up the perpetrators and mow them down.”¹¹

Always, inescapably, Eisenhower felt the weight of command. Before D-day, those close to him saw the strain. “He was as nervous as I had seen him and extremely depressed,” recalled his driver Kay Summersby, who was emotionally fragile herself. She went on, explaining that Ike was smoking and drinking too much, his stomach was tortured with cramps, he was stricken with chronic throat infections and insomnia, and his blood pressure was spiking.¹² If he was not a mental wreck, he was certainly a physical one.

When Eisenhower came home after VE-day, however, Americans did not greet a haunted or burnt-out figure. They saw the famous smile, broad and beaming, wide-open and boyish in its delight, a man at ease. Eisenhower had a way of looking surprised, flattered, even a little amazed, when crowds cheered for him, as they did at an endless succession of parades and celebrations. It was becoming, and somehow perfectly suited for the moment, an expression that was part aw-shucks, but sincere. No need to fuss, Eisenhower seemed to be saying; this is what Americans do when the world needs saving.

Robert (“Bobby”) Cutler, who went on to be President Eisenhower’s special assistant for national security, was working at the Pentagon when Eisenhower returned one sunny day in late May 1945. All Pentagon employees, except those absolutely required for duty, were told to assemble in the courtyard.

The returning hero was not showy, but he could be vain. He used a sunlamp to keep his ruddy complexion. As Supreme Allied Commander, he did not wear a helmet or combat fatigues; he did not want to suggest he was in combat when he wasn’t. He did, however, design the “Eisenhower jacket,” a short, smart tunic that displayed his athletic build. In the manner of many senior commanders in World War II, he wore few decorations on his chest. On the other hand, he didn’t need to.



General Eisenhower (Eisenhower National Historic Site, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)

Now, in the hot, bright courtyard at a minute before noon, the secretary of war, Henry Stimson, and the chief of staff of the Army, General George Marshall, appeared, along with various dignitaries and senior officers. There was applause, then silence. Then a single jeep emerged from the underground passageway. In the rear sat one officer. “From twenty-five thousand throats,” Cutler wrote “a mighty shout arose, beating forward and back on the Pentagon walls. The deafening sound burst out like a thunderclap, and continued to roll on and on, unabated. It was he, Eisenhower—Ike—the conqueror of the conquerors of the world... come home.”

The “tumult,” wrote Cutler, “came to him as a complete surprise. He broke into his famous grin.” Eisenhower was so sincere, so genuine—most of the time—that he may have been truly taken aback, notwithstanding the obvious stagecraft.¹³

Eisenhower frequently expressed a disdain for politics and politicians. He didn’t vote, and for a long time, no one had known Eisenhower’s political leanings. (Incredibly, in 1947 President Harry Truman had offered to be Ike’s vice-presidential running mate if the hero general would agree to take the top of the Democratic ticket.)¹⁴ He scorned patronage seekers and avoided Washington cocktail parties. He had no use for partisanship, and spoke only of duty to the country. All of this made him highly desirable to both political parties, who courted him as a presidential candidate in 1948 and 1952. All through 1951, delegations of kingmakers went to see Eisenhower in Paris, where he was reprising his role as Supreme Allied Commander, this time for the newly created North Atlantic Treaty

Organization, the Western Alliance shaped to stand up to the encroachments of Soviet Communism. Eisenhower politely declined, though he never quite shut the door.¹⁵ In February 1952, a citizens' committee organized by financier John Hay Whitney (owner of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the leading moderate Republican newspaper) put together a midnight rally for Ike in Madison Square Garden. Some 18,000 people jammed into the arena, with thousands more standing outside, roaring over and over, "I want Ike!" An inventive PR man named Tex McCrary had staged a spectacular show. Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, and Clark Gable (making his first appearance on TV) waved to the crowd. Mary Martin, the star of *South Pacific*, sang "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy—Ike!" Irving Berlin ended the rally by leading the audience in singing "God Bless America."¹⁶

McCrary got Twentieth Century-Fox to produce a movie of the rally, and a handsome aviatrix named Jacqueline Cochran, who had test-flown P-38s during the war, was chosen to take the two-hour film to Eisenhower. Ike and Mamie watched it in a small movie theater in their chateau outside Paris near NATO headquarters. When the lights were turned back on, Cochran stood up and raised her glass. "To the President," she said.

Eisenhower "burst into tears," Cochran recalled. "Tears were just running out of his eyes, he was overwhelmed and so overcome with the public demonstration." Eisenhower began to "talk about his mother and father, but mostly about his mother," she said. After a while, Ike told Cochran to go back to New York and tell his backers, "I'm going to run."¹⁷ The next day he wrote his best friend, Swede Hazlett, "I can't tell you what an emotional upset it is for one to realize suddenly that he himself may be the symbol of that longing and hope."¹⁸

In 1952, many Americans regarded the Soviet Union, whose spies had stolen nuclear secrets, as an imminent and existential threat. American soldiers were embroiled in a bloody and seemingly interminable struggle in Korea. Americans did not want a man on horseback. They did not want a General Douglas MacArthur, as MacArthur himself understood. Once, after hearing Eisenhower launch into a lecture about the need for military separation from civilian politics and his own reluctance to run for office, MacArthur patted his fellow general on the knee and said, a bit sourly, "That's all right, Ike. You go on like that and you'll get it for sure."¹⁹

The American people were longing for security, for peace, and Eisenhower understood that he was the one person who could answer their call. That autumn, when Eisenhower ran for president on the Republican ticket, huge posters showed him smiling broadly and holding up two fingers in a V for victory. For many voters, that was all they needed to know.²⁰

Most Americans thought the Korean War was a mistake. Soldiers fought and died for meaningless hills with names like Heartbreak Ridge and Bloody Ridge. One small promontory without any strategic significance, called Mount Baldy because it had been denuded by shellfire, changed hands eleven times. During the peak fighting, 1,500 Americans died near this barren hill every week.²¹ A year into the war, on Memorial Day 1951, Eisenhower had quietly despaired over the waste. He wrote in his diary: "Another Decoration Day finds us still adding to the number of graves that will be decorated in future years. Men are stupid."²²

As a candidate for president in the fall of 1952, Ike promised to find a way to end the slaughter. At a campaign appearance at the Masonic Temple in Detroit on October 24, less than two weeks before election day, Eisenhower declared, "I shall go to Korea!" He did not say what he would do when he got there, and in truth he did not know. But on the campaign train, when reporters were handed

mimeographed copies of Ike's speech, one said, "That does it—Ike's in." And he was, beating Adlai Stevenson by a wide margin.²³

In early December 1952, the newspapers dutifully recorded Eisenhower's tour of the bomb-cratered wastes near the 38th parallel, describing how the former Supreme Commander gazed out at the rocky hills honeycombed with North Korean defenses and took the measure of the battlefield. At one stop, he shared some frozen K rations with the men of his old army division. One of its officers was his son John. "The trip was mostly PR," John later recalled. "Dad could have seen there were hills by looking at a map."

Father and son had a loving but at times awkward relationship. Ike had lost his first child to an infant fever, and he had trouble showing his affection for his second. "I am certain I was born standing at attention," John Eisenhower wryly began a memoir, *Strictly Personal*, written in 1974, five years after his father died. Young Eisenhower had graduated from West Point on D-day, June 6, 1944, and could hardly avoid his father's shadow. Before John embarked for the front line in Korea, his father told him that if he was captured, he must kill himself. Stalin's son, he explained, had done so when captured by the Germans in World War II.



John Eisenhower, age six (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas)

As General, now President-elect, Eisenhower made desultory small talk with the other troops that icy day late in 1952, John thought of the famous photograph of his father chatting with face-blackened airborne troopers on the eve of D-day. General Eisenhower had been told the paratroopers would suffer a very heavy casualty rate the next day, and he wanted to look them in the eye before sending them to their fates. Years later John Eisenhower, a retired brigadier general, ambassador, and author,

pondered the two sides of his father, seemingly evenly balanced between open, sunny warmth and cold-bloodedness. He thought for a moment and said, with a slight smile, “Make that 75 percent cold blooded.”²⁴



President Eisenhower (Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

In his inaugural address, John F. Kennedy had boldly promised that the United States would “pay any price, bear any burden” to defend freedom around the world. But by the late summer of 1961, the young president was beginning to wonder what he had gotten himself into. Berlin, a flash point of the Cold War, was heating up with the erection of the Berlin Wall, and Kennedy realized that American soldiers might actually have to fight their Soviet counterparts. The Soviets held a huge advantage in tanks and troops. The only way to stop them would be to use nuclear weapons.

But how would the president know when to cross the line from fighting a World War II–type battle to using weapons that could—would—bring on the apocalypse? Kennedy summoned one of his informal advisers, Dean Acheson. The former secretary of state in the Truman administration was usually a vigorous hawk, impatient with dithering. But this time, when Kennedy asked Acheson when he thought the United States would have to resort to nuclear weapons, Acheson’s response “was more measured and quiet than usual,” recalled McGeorge Bundy, JFK’s national security adviser. Acheson Bundy later wrote, said that “He believed the president should himself give that question the most careful and private consideration, well before the time when the choice might present itself, that he should reach his own clear conclusion in advance as to what he would do, and that he should tell no one at all what his conclusion was.”²⁵

He should tell no one at all.... As Bundy recalled, Kennedy merely thanked Acheson, and the conversation ended. There is no record of what Kennedy was thinking, but the young president may have gotten his first inkling of the particular solitude of a nuclear-age commander in chief.

Dwight Eisenhower had long lived with this burden. He had been thinking about the question of when, if ever, to “go nuclear” throughout the eight years of his presidency and for several years before that. Eisenhower was an expert at bridge, an activity now associated in the American mind with middle-

aged or elderly people sitting around a table, staring at cards. For Eisenhower, who played as much as possible, the game was a relaxing way of doing what he did all day: reading minds, weighing options (his own and others'), thinking ahead, and concealing his intentions. Eisenhower, who generally radiated warm sincerity and whose emotions were easy to read, was actually a great bluffer, and not just at cards.

Eisenhower's basic policy throughout his presidency was known as Massive Retaliation. It was, in essence, a threat to use nuclear weapons against Communist aggression wherever and whenever it might occur. Even in his most private councils, Eisenhower remained vague about what he might or might not do in a crisis. His closest adviser, General Andrew Goodpaster, guessed Ike would never use nuclear weapons, but others weren't so sure, and Eisenhower wasn't about to tell them.²⁶

Indeed, Eisenhower sometimes sounded as if he regarded nuclear weapons as conventional weapons—"like bullets," he once said. Other times he seemed determined to rid the world of their scourge. To argue over which was the "real Eisenhower"—the nuclear brinksman or the peace lover—as many historians and scholars have done and still do, is to miss the point. Eisenhower's mission, which he achieved after he extricated America from the Korean War in 1953, was to avoid any war. As a general, Eisenhower had commanded a conquering army in a world war ended only by the use of two atomic bombs. Though he posed as a poor farm boy, he was a scholar who had closely read Clausewitz's treatise *On War*, and took to heart its basic, if overlooked, message: that small wars can become big wars, and that a nation fighting for survival will stop at nothing.²⁷ Eisenhower managed, by cleverness, indirection, subtlety, and downright deviousness—and by embracing the very weapon he could never use—to safeguard his country and possibly the rest of mankind from annihilation. As the United States and the Soviet Union created the power to end the world in the 1950s, the genial old soldier with a weakened heart contrived to keep the peace. He did so in his own distinctive way. He was honorable but occasionally opaque, outwardly amiable but inwardly seething.

This is not a general biography. The book covers Eisenhower's presidency but is almost entirely devoted to his foreign, not his domestic, policy. (I do briefly describe his civil rights record, because I think it reflects on his leadership style and worldview.) My concern is with Eisenhower's overwhelming, single, fixed preoccupation: the avoidance of war. Having done as much as any man to win World War II, Ike devoted the rest of his public service to keeping America and the world out of World War III.

As a World War II hero, General Eisenhower was remembered as a peacemaker among giant egos; his persona overshadowed by the likes of Churchill and Roosevelt, Generals Montgomery and Patton. As a president, he has been far less lionized than his predecessor, the salty, blunt Harry Truman, or his successor, the glamorous Jack Kennedy. It is easy to forget that Eisenhower was the first person in history to have the means to wreck civilization. Eisenhower did not shy from power. He used it. But he did so in a way that is still little understood.

Ike's method of leadership was subtle, to say the least. By early twenty-first-century standards, his approach to the presidency seems almost unimaginable. Eisenhower was the first president to use TV as a bully pulpit, but he was not particularly good at it, or effective in a way that would be easily understood today. The public trusted Eisenhower, not so much because of the words he spoke, which were often banal, but because of an aura he projected, an air of restrained, manly confidence. The people, most of them, judging from Eisenhower's high poll ratings, believed that he had sound judgment, that he would keep them safe, and they were right. But they had little idea what drove the

man behind the warm, grandfatherly smile, or what he was really doing in between golf games and platitudinous speeches. Eisenhower's own colleagues were not entirely sure, either.

The 1950s were boringly peaceful (or are remembered that way) only because Eisenhower made them so. Eisenhower governed by indirection, not just because he preferred to, but also because he had to. His ability to save the world from nuclear Armageddon entirely depended on his ability to convince America's enemies—and his own followers—that he was willing to use nuclear weapons. This was a bluff of epic proportions.

In poker, when a player bluffs, he hopes his opponent will not “call” and force him to expose his weak cards. Eisenhower put tremendous—some would say risky—reliance on his own intuition about his former friends and contemporary foes in the Kremlin. He believed, as he once privately wrote a colleague, that the Russian leaders were not “early Christian martyrs.”²⁸ But he did not widely express this view, or his belief that Nikita Khrushchev's menace (“We will bury you!”) was mostly bluster, or that the giant rockets Khrushchev liked to conjure—stamped out in factories, like sausages!—were chimeras, frightening but not (yet) real. Nor did President Eisenhower try as hard as he should have to calm the fears of schoolchildren (like the author) about the threat of Soviet nuclear attack. To do so might have steadied nerves, but would also have shown cards. Public terror was a price—politically as well as psychologically—well below Armageddon. Yet by not publicly diminishing the fear, Eisenhower could give strength to those eager to strike first.

Ike's wide smile, open as the Kansas sky, concealed a deep secretiveness. Eisenhower preferred small-scale covert action over grand military maneuvers. In part, he was more realistic than civilian leaders about what could go wrong when armies took the field, but he was also temperamentally inclined to operate by sleight of hand. Unfortunately, Ike, who liked having a full grip on the reins, could not control his own Central Intelligence Agency. Under Allen Dulles and the brainy but reckless Richard Bissell, the CIA saw itself as the president's secret action arm, and its blundering would derail Ike's push, at the end of his presidency, for détente with the Soviet Union and lead to the most dangerous years of the Cold War.

Eisenhower was deeply human, a man in his sixties who had had too many cups of coffee, smoked too many cigarettes, slept badly, and worried far too much. His struggle to maintain his health and equilibrium is a major subplot of this story. He had a loving wife and friends and family, and he was genial and sociable most of the time. But he was coldly, ruthlessly pragmatic. He liked to be in the company of others, but he trusted no one but himself.



JFK's inauguration; Eisenhower bundled up (Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

PART ONE

Duty

1953–1956

Confidence

EISENHOWER'S INAUGURATION AS the thirty-fourth president of the United States on January 20, 1953, did not begin as warmly or triumphantly as his return home after VE-day in the spring of 1945. On a leaden, foggy winter's morning, sitting side by side in the presidential limousine on the drive from the White House up Pennsylvania Avenue, Eisenhower and President Truman rode in icy silence. Neither man liked the other and neither pretended otherwise.¹ In his final days in office, the president, who had been blamed for "Truman's War," was bitter about Ike's vow to go to Korea. After the election, he offered Ike a plane to fly there, adding, "that is, if he still wants to go."²



Truman and Eisenhower (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas)

The sun broke through shortly before noon—"Eisenhower's luck," according to the pundits—in time for the swearing-in on two Bibles: one used by George Washington and the other used by Ike as West Point cadet. Shortly after twelve thirty, as he stood on the speaking platform on the east facade of the Capitol, Eisenhower briefly flashed his grin and raised the V sign to the vast crowd, which cheered but otherwise remained mostly hushed throughout his inaugural speech. He looked "somber-faced," according to the *New York Times*. Eisenhower's twenty-minute address was lofty but abstract, framing the Cold War in Manichaean terms but offering no way out other than by persistence and vigilance. The address was not particularly memorable and is rarely quoted, but it did include a chilling line, intoned in Eisenhower's wintry, grating voice: "Science seems ready to confer on us, as its final gift, the power to erase human life on this planet."³

Eisenhower chose not to share with the American public how much progress the scientists were making. Three months earlier, on November 1, 1952, at a Pacific atoll in the Marshall Islands, sailors had watched agog as a giant, multihued pillar of fire rose five miles into the sky, completely

obliterating everything beneath it. The bomb's fireball, four miles wide, would have incinerated San Francisco in a flash. The H-bomb, five hundred times more powerful than the atomic bomb, had been born. ("It's a boy!" exclaimed the bomb's champion, Edward Teller.)⁴

Eisenhower was on a postelection golfing vacation when he got his first formal briefing on the new weapon, code-named "Mike," from Roy Snapp, secretary of the Atomic Energy Commission. In the manager's office at the Augusta National Golf Club, Snapp handed Eisenhower a top-secret memorandum from the chairman of the AEC, Gordon Dean. Dean laconically wrote that the island base for the test was now "missing." The underwater crater was fifteen hundred yards in diameter.

As Supreme Allied Commander, Eisenhower had always been unusually open to new scientific research on weapons and intelligence gathering. To the briefer, the president-elect now said that, while he favored scientific research, he wondered at the reason "for us to build enough destructive power to destroy everything."⁵ He brooded for a moment, accepted what he could not change, and began to think how he would handle this terrible new reality.

The scale of the blast and the technological leap from fission bomb to the far more powerful thermonuclear bomb were, at Eisenhower's request, kept secret at first. Once president, he ordered the word "thermonuclear" be kept out of government press releases. ("Keep them confused as to fission and fusion," he instructed.)^{*6} Despite his open demeanor, at press conferences Eisenhower would from time to time pretend to know less than he did, leaving the illusion that he was distracted and ill informed about matters that deeply engaged him.

Indeed, Eisenhower was willing to appear less than sharp, even a little slow-witted, if it served some larger purpose. Unlike most politicians, he was not driven by an insecure need to be loved and recognized. He possessed an inner confidence born of experience. This is not to say, however, that he was serene. Accustomed to the "august calmness" of his old boss, General George Marshall, national security aide Bobby Cutler recognized that he was in for a different experience when he went to work for Eisenhower. Ike would restlessly twirl his glasses, spin in his chair, doodle, jump up and pace, grab at the air with his huge hands, all while prodding and probing his aides in a sharp, flat, rapid-fire voice. When he was mad, which was often, a blood vessel in his temple would throb ominously. He hated wasting time and would terminate conversations, not because he was rude but because there was always something more to be done. "One could almost hear the whirring of a dynamo," recalled Cutler.⁷

After commanding in a world war alongside the likes of Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Charles de Gaulle, and Joseph Stalin, Ike was not intimidated by anyone. The presidency was at some level more of the same. After his first full day in office, he wrote in his diary: "My first day at the president's desk. Plenty of worries and difficult problems. But such has been my portion for a long time—the result is that this just seems (today) like a continuation of all I've been doing since July 1941—even before that."⁸

Pressure and anxiety were familiar companions to the sixty-two-year-old Eisenhower. He had learned to make light of hard choices, while subtly reminding others that he knew about stress in ways they could only imagine. In 1955, Eisenhower was invited to give the commencement address at Penn State, where his brother Milton was president. As the big day arrived, rain threatened. Did Ike want to move the ceremony indoors or take his chances in the bigger outdoor stadium? Eisenhower shrugged and said, "You decide. I haven't worried about the weather since June 6, 1944."⁹ This was not true; as an avid golfer, he worried about the weather all the time. But it was useful to make others think that he was imperturbable.

And yet he knew that he was entering a new and uncertain world. Before he left the Oval Office on that first day, he received a brief phone call from General Omar Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Turning to his secretary, Ann Whitman, Eisenhower said that he had just learned a lesson. His old friend Brad, who had entered West Point with him in 1911 and had been his comrade in arms throughout the Second World War, had addressed him not as “Ike” but as “Mr. President.” From that moment, Eisenhower later wrote, he knew he would be “separated from all others, including my oldest and best friends. I would be far more alone now than when commanding the Allied forces in Europe in World War II.”¹⁰

Vice President Richard Nixon had reason to resent President Eisenhower. Although Ike was friendly to his running mate on the 1952 Republican ticket, Nixon couldn’t help but feel like a junior officer in the presence of the commanding general. Ike’s geniality masked a reserve, a coolness, which Nixon felt keenly. Nixon’s insecurities had turned to anger when Ike kept his distance from Nixon during a campaign-fund flap just six weeks before election day. The California senator had been able to save his place on the GOP ticket only by appealing to the public with his maudlin but effective “Checkers” speech.”¹¹ Nixon understood and admired two important truths about Eisenhower. “He was a far more complex and devious man than most people realized,” wrote Nixon in his 1962 memoir, *Six Crises*. (Nixon added, “in the best sense of those words.”) And Nixon could see that Eisenhower identified himself with the nation. There was no point arguing “what’s best for Eisenhower” versus “what is best for the nation,” Nixon told friends and colleagues. In Eisenhower’s mind, they were one and the same.¹²

Eisenhower had been taught at West Point to give credit to others and to avoid casting blame by name. Indoctrinated in the virtues of the team, he tried to convince himself that he was essentially replaceable. He went so far as to carry around a corny anonymous poem:

*... Take a bucket, fill it with water,
Put your hand in—clear up to the wrist.
Now pull it out; the hole that remains
Is a measure of how you’ll be missed...*

*The moral of this quaint example;
To do just the best that you can,
Be proud of yourself, but remember,
There is no Indispensable Man!*¹³

The evidence is overwhelming that he believed quite the opposite. Dwight Eisenhower recognized in himself the one man who could lead the United States in an era, when—for the first time in history—not one but two nations, mortal enemies, had the power to plunge the world into darkness. The image of Ike as a Cincinnatus, the citizen-soldier reluctantly but dutifully brought back from his retirement to lead his nation, glosses over Eisenhower’s own fierce ambition. Eisenhower played hard to get in 1951 and into 1952, but he could easily have said no and retired with his honor intact. He wanted to be in charge because he believed he was the man for the age.

Eisenhower was not above politics; he had been a superb military politician and learned several valuable lessons from the experience. He was critical of the Democrats, who, he feared, were

determined to spend the country into bankruptcy and risked that a totalitarian state might rise out of the ensuing chaos. Fascism was a very recent memory for the man who had, at a very high cost, defeated it. But he was even more disparaging of his own party, certainly its dominant wing, which was at once isolationist and obsessed with Communist plots.

Eisenhower disliked strutters and desk pounders, especially after working for General MacArthur in the 1930s. He preferred to operate by indirection and behind the scenes.

But he wanted to be in control. His first battle in life was to tame his temper. As a boy, denied permission by his parents to go on a Boy Scout event, he beat his hands against a tree until they bled. Fond of quoting scripture, his mother, Ida, had taken him aside and said, “He that conquereth his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city.”¹⁴ Shortly after Pearl Harbor, General Marshall informed Eisenhower that he was too valuable as a staff officer in Washington to be sent overseas to fight. Brimming with self-pity, Ike burst out bitterly that he would do his duty—“if that locks me to a desk for the rest of the war, so be it!” The next day Ike was full of regret. He wrote in his diary, “Anger cannot win. It cannot even think clearly.”¹⁵

Ike credited the warm, pacifist Ida for teaching him self-control. “I thought to myself what a poor job she had done,” recalled an aide, Bernard Shanley.¹⁶ Ike’s subordinates were awed by his capacity for rage. “It was like looking into a Bessemer furnace,” recalled one of them, Bryce Harlow.¹⁷ Ike’s personal doctor, Howard Snyder, noted that during World War II a journalist had dubbed Ike “the terrible tempered Mr. Bang,” and Snyder himself observed “the twisted cord-like temple arteries standing out of the side of his head” when Ike became angry.¹⁸ If Ike felt an outburst coming on, he sometimes simply got up and—even more frightening to his staff—walked out of the room.¹⁹ When he was president, Ike and Mamie would occasionally retreat to the small White House movie theater, though most feature films bored Eisenhower or were too mushy for his tastes. (“Can’t you find a new western?” he would demand of the White House staff.)* An exception was a 1951 film entitled *Angel in the Outfield*, about an irascible baseball manager named Guffy McGovern, who is about to lose his job because his team is so awful. An angel appears from heaven to offer the manager a deal: God will let the team win if McGovern learns to control his temper. Through various twists and turns, redemption is achieved. Sergeant John Moaney, Ike’s manservant, claimed to have run the movie thirty-eight times, according to Ike’s grandson, David. As the lights came on, Ike would say “Wonderful show” almost inaudibly, and head for bed, resolved to keep his temper with difficult politicians in the morning.²⁰

Eisenhower never entirely tamed his emotions. But he did not bully, and his outbursts would pass. On occasion, he used anger to advantage. As a five-star general, he took for granted the retinue of horse-holders in constant attendance, but at the same time he could be sweet with his staff, bestowing small kindnesses. In return, they were loyal; Eisenhower’s White House staff turnover was very low. He was blessed with a natural likability. “He merely has to smile at you, and you trust him at once,” conceded Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, who was, by nature, suspicious and churlish.²¹ “No one hated him. His enemies didn’t even hate him,” recalled Karl Harr, a national security staffer.²²

Ike learned to keep up a genial manner, to seem interested, and, when necessary, to hide his true feelings and intentions. His motives were in no way malevolent. To the contrary, he was commanding himself to rise above pettiness, pride, and jealousy, human weakness he knew and understood. Eisenhower was confident in a way that transcended arrogance. He did not need to show off. He knew that he had a gift: the power to make people—indeed, whole peoples—trust him.

Certainly, his allies in World War II sorely tried his patience. The British chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, initially thought he had “only the vaguest conception of war.” (Early in the war, British officers often referred to the Yanks as “our Italians.”) In his dealings with the haughty Montgomery, Ike managed to be warm, open, and inclusive, even as “Monty” tested the limits of his short-fuse temper. “God damn it, I can deal with anybody except that son of a bitch!” Eisenhower once exploded.²³ But for the most part, Ike knew he could afford to be patient with the likes of Montgomery. Ike confided to speechwriter Arthur Larson that he had tremendous arguments with Prime Minister Churchill, who was demanding and impulsive. “But it didn’t really matter,” Ike added quietly, “because I was the boss.”²⁴

Eisenhower was sometimes even accused of being too agreeable. General George Patton railed that Ike was “damned near a Benedict Arnold” and grouched that, as a result of Eisenhower’s amiability, the British “are playing us for suckers.”²⁵ But Ike’s friendliness was often underwritten not by a sense of emotion but alliance. Indeed, Eisenhower put up with the bloodthirsty, anti-Semitic Patton, resurrecting Patton’s career after he struck an enlisted man and relieving him of his command only after he announced at the end of the war that the Americans should join up with the Germans and invade Russia. Ike was fond of Patton and knew he needed him as a war fighter, especially as a tank commander pursuing a defeated enemy—but then, when the war was done, he needed him no longer.

In one of his memoirs, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*, Ike portrayed himself as a somewhat lazy student who liked to relax by reading westerns and listening to his favorite dance band, Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians. Elsewhere he described himself as a “simple country boy,” and mournfully responded to a reporter’s question, “That’s just too complicated for a dumb bunny like me.”²⁷ Eisenhower was, in fact, a well-read humanist. As a boy, he had become so entranced by volumes of Greek and Roman history that his mother, irked that he was neglecting his chores, locked the books in a closet. Eisenhower found the key and read while she was off doing errands (another of his heroes, or in this case an antihero, was Hannibal, a magnificent loser). Ike’s high school yearbook predicted that he’d end up as a history professor at Yale. His de facto graduate school was the three years he spent in the early 1920s under the command of General Fox Conner, a genius soldier-scholar, in a remote outpost in the Panama Canal Zone. (It was Conner who taught Ike, “Always take your job seriously, never yourself.”) With Conner, Eisenhower read Plato, Tacitus, and Nietzsche, among other philosophers and thinkers.²⁸

The younger Ike had also been shaped and hardened by personal suffering. His firstborn child, Doud Dwight, known as “Icky,” died of scarlet fever in 1921, and he later wrote that he never really recovered from the loss.²⁹ During the war he declared to Mamie (but also to himself) that when “pressure mounts and strain increases everyone begins to show the weaknesses in his makeup. It is up to the Commander to conceal his; above all to conceal doubt, fear, and distrust.”³⁰ The famous smile Ike told his grandson, David, came not from some sunny feel-good philosophy but from getting knocked down by a boxing coach at West Point. The coach refused to spar anymore after Ike got up off the mat looking rueful. “If you can’t smile when you get up from a knockdown,” the coach said, “you’re never going to lick an opponent.”³¹

That smile had taken him far, as had the deep learning he shrouded under a mask of simplicity. Through self-control, he had been able to keep himself and the Allies together to liberate Europe. He would soon learn that winning the Cold War—or simply avoiding World War III—would be harder. Certainly, it would be lonelier.

The Card Player



The president practices his swing. (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas)

ON FEBRUARY 7, 1953, Eisenhower wanted to play golf “very, very badly,” as his secretary, Ann Whitman, put it in her diary. The day was cold and rainy, and Ike kept wandering out of the Oval Office onto the porch by the Rose Garden to stare up at the clouds. “Sometimes,” he told Whitman, “feel so sorry for myself I could cry.”¹

Whitman knew her boss was not entirely exaggerating. It may have been the middle of winter, and Eisenhower had been in office less than three weeks, but golf was vital to him. Barred by his image-conscious handlers from venturing out on the links during the presidential campaign, he had been anxious to play as a way of dealing with the pressures of his work. Eisenhower had a healthy respect for the physical and mental toll exacted on the men who had occupied the Oval Office before him. “That damn job,” he called the presidency when he was still a lowly staff officer in the 1930s, based in Washington. “Hell, the job killed [Woodrow] Wilson,” Ike had exclaimed to Mamie.² As president, Eisenhower brought the same discipline to relaxation that he applied to everything else.

Golf was essential to his daily routine. When he awakened in the morning, he limbered up by taking a few swings in his bedroom with his favorite eight-iron. He sometimes swung the club when dictating to Mrs. Whitman. At 5:00 p.m. he would rise from Teddy Roosevelt’s old Navy Department desk in the Oval Office, put on his golf shoes, and head out the door, leaving tiny spike holes in the floorboards. On the Ellipse, the greensward stretching south from the White House toward the Washington Monument, he would practice fairway approach shots. His faithful valet (or as he was known in military parlance, his striker), Sergeant John Moaney, would shag the balls while tourists

peered through the iron fence.

Eisenhower teed off for a full round of golf about eight hundred times in his eight years as president. Almost every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, he played three-hour, eighteen-hole rounds at Burning Tree, an all-male club in the Maryland suburbs. On twenty-three trips to Georgia, he played roughly two hundred times at Augusta National, where friends built him, on the 10th hole, spacious three-story house known initially as Mamie's Cabin, then more commonly as the Eisenhower Cabin. (Mamie herself never played but approved of the game as a stress reliever for her husband.)³ Ike was a respectable weekend golfer, usually shooting in the 80s, but he had a congenital fade and an unreliable putter, and he sometimes blew up with a torrent of *hells* and *damnations*.⁴ (Ike almost never used stronger language, and he disapproved of off-color stories. He would turn and walk away if a friend unwittingly tried a dirty joke.)⁵ The United States Professional Golf Association helped build a putting green and sand trap outside his office on the South Lawn in 1954. In the spring of 1955, when some unruly squirrels created divots in the green, Ike ordered them shot. Eisenhower was accustomed to having his wishes become commands, but in this case the offending animals were caught and removed.⁶

Eisenhower had grown up poor in Abilene, Kansas. As Army Chief of Staff, he had an office larger than the house in which he had lived with his parents and four brothers. Uncomfortable with ostentatious luxury, during the war he disapproved of his lavish suite at London's Claridge's hotel, with its gold-and-black sitting room, and moved out. ("Makes me feel like I'm living in sin," he said.)⁷ But he wore custom-made suits (donated by New York clothiers) and cheerfully loud golf clothes. "He never seemed to wear the same thing twice," recalled Arthur Larson.⁸ His clothes were carefully laid out every morning by Moaney. Dressing the president was a precise, half-hour ritual. (It was like seeing "somebody get ready for battle" in the movies, said his grandson, David, who as a boy watched with wonder. "He holds his hands out and puts his armor on, right plate armor, left plate armor...")⁹ George Thompson, who filled in for Moaney on his days off, was astounded to find that he had to hold the president's undershorts for him to step into.¹⁰

Eisenhower was at once intimate and courtly with his staff. He rose when his secretary entered the room and, for the first two years, addressed her as "Mrs. Whitman."¹¹ A tall, handsome woman in her early forties, Ann Whitman could instantly sense the president's mood; staffers would check with her in the morning for updates.¹² As she revealed to her biographer Bob Donovan, she knew the president's likes and dislikes—that he enjoyed classical as well as cowboy music, "though he was deathly afraid of being considered highbrow"; that he pretended not to like big crowds along his motorcade route; that he liked seeing old Abilene friends and classmates "for about ten minutes"; that he disliked visits by Republican ladies wearing corsages; also "abstract" paintings, "women who cry," "people who are afraid of him," "people who gush," and being physically touched by almost anyone.¹³ Like her boss, Whitman was a shrewd judge of character and intention. Proud, sensitive, smartly dressed, a competent golfer and bridge player, she was devoted to Ike, drawn to him from the moment she first laid eyes on the general in 1945, during a victory parade down Broadway (she even left her husband, a United Fruit Company executive, behind in New York to work for the president). "When he passed he seemed to look right at me," she told Donovan, the *New York Herald Tribune* White House correspondent, who noted, "It was a familiar comment. Eisenhower had a knack for conveying to individuals in a crowd the illusion that he was looking right at them."¹⁴



Mrs. Whitman (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas)

Mamie wanted Whitman fired almost as soon as she joined the Eisenhower campaign in 1952.¹⁵ Eisenhower's wife recalled the rumors of an affair with Kay Summersby, Ike's pretty wartime driver repeated by "sympathetic" friends in Washington, which was much speculated about but never proved. She did not want the experience to happen again.¹⁶ Ike had rather coldly cut off Summersby after the war. (Hearing, in 1947, that his former aide was upset about a failed relationship, Eisenhower noted in his diary, "I trust she pulls herself together, but she is Irish and tragic.")¹⁷ Eisenhower managed to allay his wife's fears about Whitman, and she remained his valuable and loyal secretary throughout his presidency. Yet the tension between Whitman and Mamie never really went away, and Mamie visited the Oval Office all of four times in eight years, never when Whitman was there.¹⁸ Mamie had moved thirty-five times in thirty-five years as an army wife, and the White House was her reward (though less grand than the Supreme Allied Commander's chateau outside Paris). Some of the moves to wretched base housing had been almost unendurable. (In miasmatic Panama, she made her husband kill a bat with his ceremonial sword.) The First Lady ruled a separate domain, the social White House. "They never talked business," said their son John. "They had a truce."¹⁹

In a 1972 oral history, Mamie recalled that "Ike was the sort of man that when he finished his day work he left his work at the office. When he came home he was home and we didn't discuss what his big problems were."²⁰ Mamie could be a vivacious hostess—the Eisenhowers gave more state dinners than any of their predecessors—but her command post was her bed. She rarely arose before noon, holding forth to the staff while propped up against a massive custom-made pink headboard. She saw her husband over dinner, usually on trays in front of the TV set, trying without success to stop him from eating too fast.²¹

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